Published in final edited form as:

Cult Health Sex. 2015 August ; 17(7): 891–905. doi:10.1080/13691058.2015.1007168.

‘They think that gays have money’: Gender identity and transactional sex among black men who have sex with men in four South African townships

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Abstract

Transactional sex has not been studied much among men who have sex with men in Africa. Consequently, little is understood about attitudes towards the practice, the circumstances that give rise to it, or how transactional sex relationships are managed. We conducted in-depth interviews with 81 black men aged 20–44 from four low-resourced townships in Tshwane, South Africa. Transactional sex was a widely used strategy for initiating and sustaining relationships with regular and casual partners, and was motivated by both the need for subsistence and for consumption. Alcohol-based exchanges, in particular, provided men in the townships with a covert and safe platform to communicate erotic, sexual and romantic attraction to other men and bars and other drinking places were a popular venue for meeting potential sexual partners. The majority of ‘feminine-identifying’ men had engaged in transactional sex as the providers of money and material goods compared to men who identified as either ‘masculine’ or as ‘both masculine and feminine’. Surprisingly, however, this did not necessarily give them greater control in these relationships. Our study provides an initial foray into a complex socio-sexual phenomenon and suggests that gender identity is an important construct for understanding transactional sex relationships among men in Africa.

Keywords

Transactional sex; black men who have sex with men; HIV; gender identity; Africa

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Introduction

Although several quantitative studies show that transactional sex is prevalent among men who have sex with men in Africa (Kajubi et al. 2008; Lane et al. 2009), little is understood about attitudes towards the practice, the circumstances that give rise to it, or how transactional sex relationships are constituted and managed. A multi-country study with 537 men who have sex with men found that substantial proportions, 62.6% in the Malawi sample, 37.5% in the Namibia sample and 29.3% in the Botswana sample, had ever engaged in transactional sex with other men (Baral et al. 2009). Another study found that over one third (35.9%) of 250 respondents interviewed in Lesotho had either paid or received money or goods for anal sex with other men (Baral et al. 2011). Some studies suggest a link between transactional sex and HIV-related risk (Ayoola, Sekoni, and Odeyemi 2013). Lane and colleagues (2008), for instance, found that “alcohol-for-sex” exchanges, more than any other types of exchanges, predicted HIV infection in their South African sample. Other HIV-risk factors for men who have sex with men in Africa include the widespread social stigma surrounding same-sex relationships which has been shown to limit access to HIV-related services (Knox et al. 2011; Rispel et al. 2011) and to contribute to large numbers of men who engage in concurrent sexual relationships with both men and women (Beyrer et al. 2010; Smith et al. 2009).

Descriptions of transactional sex among men who have sex with men in Africa vary: some studies focus on any sexual relationships with other men that involve the exchange of money or gifts (Ntata, Muula, and Siziya 2008; Cloete et al. 2008). Other studies are more specific and focus only on men who have anal intercourse with male partners in exchange for money or goods (Baral et al. 2009). Yet still other studies focus on alcohol- and drug-related exchanges (Lane et al. 2009), in addition to monetary and other material exchange. Most descriptions rightly distinguish ‘transactional sex’ from ‘sex work’; the latter is generally understood to refer to exchanges that have a clearly defined buyer and seller and in which sex is the commodity being sold. Globally, sex workers may be defined “as female, male and transgender adults aged over 18 years who sell consensual sexual services in return for cash or payment in kind, and who may sell sex formally or informally, regularly or occasionally” (UNAIDS/World Health Organization 2011: 1). In contrast, transactional sex typically refers to a different form of material exchanges that occur between sexual partners. Transactional sex is defined as a sexual relationship—often between an older man and a younger woman—that involves the exchange of material goods and gifts (Luke 2003). Although transactional sex sometimes entails substantial financial and material rewards, the individuals involved in the practice do not necessarily consider themselves to be engaged in sex work (Aina 1991; Nguyen 2010).

Most studies of transactional sex among men who have sex with men in Africa do not adequately examine why or how the practice occurs. Instead, there is often an implicit assumption that men engage in transactional sex with other men primarily to benefit financially. Because of their largely quantitative nature, few studies have actually asked men why they engage in these exchange relationships. A recent qualitative study of transactional sex among men in Nigeria showed that many believed that transactional sex was a legitimate economic strategy to adopt in the face of poverty (Population Council Research Report

2012). Nguyen's (2010) study, in turn, suggested that material exchanges among men in West Africa simultaneously addressed men's desires for economic and emotional support. Increasingly, scholars who have studied transactional sex among heterosexuals argue that the phenomenon should be viewed as a complex socio-sexual interaction, rather than as a purely economic phenomenon (Hunter 2002; Masvawure 2010; Shefer, Clowes, and Vergnani 2012). These scholars thus distinguish between two types of transactional sex: that which is entered into primarily to meet immediate subsistence needs and that entered into primarily to meet non-subsistence needs. Hunter (2002) suggested the use of the terms 'sex-for-subsistence' and 'sex-for-consumption' for each type, respectively.

In practice, however, transactional sex is usually driven by a combination of the two, that is, the need for subsistence and the desire for consumption. Additionally, transactional sex is also driven by a variety of non-material factors, namely the desire to express and explore one's sexuality (Masvawure 2010), to self-fashion oneself as a modern subject (Leclerc-Madlala 2003) and to experience love and pleasure (Nguyen 2010, Niang et al. 2003). Sex-for-consumption is associated with the desire to access consumption goods and ostentatious lifestyles that are associated with success, social prestige, and modernity (Bhana and Pattman 2011; Potgieter et al. 2013). A recent study of transactional sex at a university campus in Zimbabwe showed that the providers (i.e., heterosexual men) in these relationships also acquired social status and prestige in their peer groups by being seen in the company of young, attractive and intelligent university women (Masvawure 2010). Sex-for-consumption involving alcohol exchanges has been shown to be widespread among heterosexual and MSM populations alike in South Africa and is associated with sexual violence and unprotected sex, both of which make it a high HIV-risk practice (Jewkes et al. 2012; Kalichman, Simbayi, and Cain 2011).

Among heterosexuals in Africa, transactional sex is considered a high HIV-risk activity for young women in particular, because it usually entails substantial age and wealth disparities between the parties involved (Kaufman and Stavrou 2004). In these relationships, power is often skewed in favour of the providing partner (usually the man) with the receiving partner (usually the woman) likely to be a victim of gender-based violence, including sexual violence (Dunkle et al. 2007). Little, however, is known about how power is structured in the transactional sex relationships of MSM or the role that constructs of gender play in these relationships. An early anthropological study of same-sex relationships among male miners in South Africa showed that these relationships replicated prevailing gender norms in the country, with the masculine partner assuming the role of provider, while the receiving partner assumed the feminine role and being expected to cook, clean and provide various domestic comforts (Moodie 1994).

Gender identity, defined as an individual's internal sense of being masculine or feminine, which may or may not match one's biological sex (Howard 2000), has been shown to be important in understanding how men who have sex with men in Africa organise their social and sexual lives (Gaudio 1998; Moen et al. 2014; Rabie and Lesch 2009), including partner preference, sexual practices and HIV-risk. Sandfort and colleagues (2012), for instance, found that feminine identifying men in South Africa typically preferred masculine-identifying partners and were the receptive partners during anal sex while masculine-

identifying men were usually the insertive partners and were more likely to engage in concurrent sexual relationships with both men and women. Our study examined transactional sex among a sample of black men from four low-resourced townships in South Africa in order to understand why these relationships are established, how they are managed and men's general attitudes towards the practice.

Methods

Overview

We conducted in-depth interviews with 81 black men aged 20–44 from four townships in Tshwane between 2009–2010. Men were eligible to participate in the study if they lived in one of the four targeted townships (i.e. Atteridgeville, Hammanskraal, Mamelodi, or Soshanguve), and reported having engaged in oral, anal, or masturbatory sex with at least one other man in the preceding year.

Sampling and recruitment

Study participants were recruited using a variety of purposive sampling techniques. These included the use of a Community Advisory Board, outreach workers from the community-based organisation we had partnered with, a team of ethnographers and key informants. These groups referred men they knew to contact the study team if they were interested in participating in the study. This approach is commonly used in research to reach individuals who are difficult to locate, such as those in our sample. Although the rights of sexual minorities as a ground for non-discrimination are enshrined in South Africa's constitution, same-sex relationships continue to be socially and culturally stigmatised in the country. This made it challenging to recruit black men who have sex with men using more traditional methods. All men who were referred to the study underwent initial phone screening to ensure they met the eligibility criteria and to ensure that the purposive sample was sufficiently diverse in terms of age, sexual orientation (i.e., identification as gay or not and experiencing sexual attraction to just men or to both men and women), gender identity (i.e., feeling masculine or feminine) and choice of sexual partners (i.e., exclusively men or both men and women).

Procedures

In-depth interviews lasted approximately 90 minutes and were held in private areas at the offices of our different collaborating organisations in Pretoria or in the townships, depending on participants' preferences. A team of ethnographers conducted the interviews. The majority of interviews (75%) were conducted in English. As is common among South Africans who live in township communities, discussions were sometimes conducted in more than one language: some interviews were conducted in a combination of English and Setswana or Sepedi, and a few were conducted completely in either language.

We used a semi-structured guide, which was developed with input from members from the Community Advisory Board, to explore a variety of issues, namely: perceptions of, and responses to, same-sex relationships, sexual practices, HIV testing behaviour and social support networks. This paper focuses only on informants' perceptions and personal

experiences of transactional sex. We did not use the term ‘transactional sex’ in the interviews, but asked about the practice using three questions, namely: a) ‘Some men have sex with other men to get something in return, like food, cellphones etc. Have you ever done that?’; b) ‘Under what circumstances would someone buy drinks for someone else?’ and; c) ‘Some men buy drinks for potential sexual partners hoping to attract them or turn them on. Have you seen that happen?’ We do not include any data relating to sex work. Interviewers were instructed to follow the guide closely and to probe for more in depth information. Follow-up probe questions were rehearsed with interviewers but not standardised.

Ethical considerations

All study procedures were approved by the Ethical Committee of the Human Sciences Research Council and the Institutional Review Board of the New York State Psychiatric Institute. We obtained written informed consent from all study participants and assured them of their right to withdraw from the study at any time and of their right not to answer questions they were uncomfortable with. We did not collect or record the names or residential addresses of participants; when these were provided accidentally, we did not include them in the final transcripts. We use pseudonyms in this paper.

Data analysis

All interviews were transcribed verbatim; passages or complete interviews that were not in English were translated during transcription. All transcripts were reviewed by senior researchers at the HSRC and at Columbia University prior to data analysis. A code-book was developed *a priori*, based on the study aims and the questions explored in the interview guide. This generated over 40 codes, one of which was transactional sex. This code was used for descriptions of observations, experiences, or cultural norms related to the exchange of sex for money, gifts, alcohol, or drugs. It also included information on who initiated the exchange, where it took place, social norms guiding the transaction, and the practice of buying alcoholic drinks for desired sexual partners. A team of at least two graduate level researchers independently coded half (37 out of 81) of the interview transcripts, based on this codebook. The researchers met at regular intervals to review and reach consensus on the application of codes. Once consensus about the application of codes was reached, the remaining transcripts (44) were divided up among three researchers for individual coding.

Data was analysed systematically using Atlas.ti., an electronic software package for qualitative data. After all the transcripts were coded, and codes were reviewed and reconciled, we used constant comparative method developed by Glaser (1965) to analyse data coded as transactional sex. We compared men’s responses against each other and identified recurring ideas and major similarities and differences in participants’ experiences. We paid particular attention to attitudes towards transactional sex and to the circumstances and contexts under which the practice occurred.

Findings

Participant characteristics

The average age of participants in our sample was 25 years, with ages ranging from 20–39 years (see Table 1). Over one third (n=31) of our sample had completed or were currently pursuing a post-high school qualification such as a university degree or diploma, while only a small minority (less than 5) had not completed high-school. The remainder had completed high-school. Half of the participants in our sample (n=40) were unemployed. The majority were either single (n=35) or in stable relationships with other men (n=28). A few were in concurrent relationships with women (n=8).

We also asked participants about their gender identity, specifically if they ‘felt masculine or feminine.’ Half (n=40) reported that they felt feminine or ‘more like a woman’ and a number of informants in this category (n=11) indicated that they wore make-up and dressed in a way that allowed them to outwardly express their femininity. One third (n=24) reported that they ‘felt masculine’, and about one-tenth (n=12) reported that they ‘felt both masculine and feminine.’ We therefore use the terms ‘feminine-identifying’, ‘masculine-identifying’ and ‘both masculine and feminine-identifying’ to describe each group, respectively. When also asked about their preferred sex roles or sexual positioning: fifty men stated that they were bottoms or the receptive partner, sixteen were tops or the insertive partner and eight were ‘versatile’, that is, both tops and bottoms. Feminine-identifying men accounted for the majority of bottoms (n=36) compared to those who identified as masculine (n=7) or as both masculine and feminine (n=7). In turn, masculine-identifying men accounted for the majority of tops (n=11) compared to those who identified as feminine (n=2) or as both masculine and feminine (n=2). Finally, slightly more of the ‘versatile’ men identified as masculine (n=5) and the rest identified as both masculine and feminine (n=3). Table 1 shows the socio-demographics of the individuals cited in this paper.

Transactional sex

Twenty-nine (29) men responded in the affirmative when asked if they had ‘ever received or given money, gifts or alcohol in exchange for sex with another man’ (see Table 2). Of these, the majority (18/29) said they had engaged in the practice as the providing partner: that is, they had *given* another man money, alcoholic drinks, or goods in exchange for sex. The remainder (11/29) reported having engaged in transactional sex as the receiving partner: that is, they had *accepted* money, alcohol, or goods from another man. We use the terms ‘provider’ and ‘receiver’, respectively, to describe each role in this paper. Over half of the men who had ever engaged in transactional sex in our study described their gender identity as feminine (17/29) compared to those who identified as either masculine (8/29) or as both masculine and feminine (4/29) (see Table 2). Furthermore, the majority of men who had provided money, alcohol and goods to other men, were feminine-identifying (12/18). Only a few providers identified as masculine (4/18) or as both masculine and feminine (2/18).

Attitudes towards providing material support to regular partners

A common theme among men who had provided material support to male partners was that the material exchanges were acceptable and normal if undertaken within the context of a regular relationship:

All the people that I have dated, I don't expect anything from them but they expect things from me [like] money, food, some they want clothes...I feel like I'm giving support because we are supposed to help each other. -

(Mothudi, feminine-identifying, 21 yrs, Hammanskraal).

However, providers also pointed out that there were limits to the amount of material support they were willing to give to partners. Once this limit was exceeded, men felt that requests for material support simply became exploitative, and therefore unacceptable. Men gave accounts in which they, or other people they knew, were exploited financially by regular partners:

One wanted airtime [i.e., prepaid cellphone vouchers] then I transferred it to him and then he [asked for more]. The second time I was like 'No, don't do that.' And he actually said, 'You are a lawyer [and yet] you can't buy me airtime?' -

(Poloko, masculine-identifying, 26 yrs, Soshanguve).

Every time after sleeping [i.e., after sex] and it's time for him to go home the next day, he always wanted something. To the point that I didn't even have a cellphone; he had taken it. -

(Tsebo, feminine-identifying, 26 yrs, Soshanguve).

The frequency and timing of requests, rather than the specific goods being requested, were what some men seemed to find objectionable: Tsebo, for instance, noted that his partner asked for material support *every time* they had sex while Poloko's partner displayed a sense of entitlement by questioning Poloko's refusal to provide regular material support, such as prepaid cellphone vouchers.

Attitudes towards providing material support to regular partners, in particular, differed by gender identity. Feminine-identifying men and men who identified as both masculine and feminine reported that in many instances they had provided on-going material support to partners unwittingly and some felt taken advantage of. They gave examples of instances when normal requests for support—which they had no problems responding to—became excessive over time, and thus problematic:

In the beginning we were in a relationship together but as time goes on, it was feeling like maybe he's doing me a favour or whatsoever because he was demanding so much...and I was getting irritated. -

(Bheka, both masculine and feminine-identifying, 23 yrs, Soshanguve).

A commonly expressed view among feminine-identifying men was that providing material support was the only way that they could sustain their relationships. They alleged that

‘straight’ men (i.e., non-gay identifying), in particular, only engaged in same-sex relationships to benefit materially.

In contrast, a common view among masculine-identifying men who had provided money or material goods to other men was that they had done so voluntarily. One participant explained that he regularly provided material support to his partners but that this support did not amount to very much. This participant pointed out that, at any one time, he had given ‘only R20–30 (~USD 2–3)’ to a partner who was ‘always in need of money to purchase marijuana’ (i.e., drugs) and R12 in transportation money for a different partner who was ‘economically disadvantaged.’ Overall, only a small minority of such men were opposed to providing material support to partners and indicated that they would immediately terminate a relationship if a partner ever voiced such an expectation.

Attitudes towards receiving material support from regular partners

A common view among men who had received material support from partners was that they expected to receive such support and would request it, if it was not forthcoming. Receivers saw material support from partners as part and parcel of being in a regular relationship with other men. A few feminine-identifying men, such as the respondent below, explained that they considered themselves to be ‘women’ and therefore deliberately looked for partners who could support them materially:

I want a man who gives me money. I have to wash my own clothes and stuff like that. I need perfume as well. So, I need money from a guy because to a guy I am a woman. -

(Thuso, feminine-identifying, 30 yrs, Soshanguve).

Masculine-identifying men who had received material support from their partners expressed the view that ‘gay men’ (i.e., gay identifying men) complied with these requests because they had the resources and did not mind providing for their partners:

We’ll sleep with them [i.e., other men]...then tell them that we need money and they would just give us money...any amount that we would ask for. -

(Tungu, masculine-identifying, 20 yrs, Hammanskraal).

None of the receiving men, however, reported that they had ever provided material support to their partners. A few participants were wary of accepting unsolicited material support from other men and preferred, instead, to receive particular gifts and goods that they had explicitly asked for:

I just don’t accept gifts. It is only when I ask for something that I expect a guy to give me something. I do not want to feel like I am being bought or something like that. -

(Rudzani, masculine-identifying, 29 yrs, Hammanskraal).

Other men indicated that they were self-sufficient and hence did not expect to be provided for by anyone:

I am not a girl anyway, so I do not need a man to buy me clothes or give me money...because I work for myself. -

(Sam, feminine-identifying, 21 yrs, Hammanskraal).

Attitudes towards 'alcohol-for-sex' exchanges and transactional sex with casual partners

Transactional sex also occurred frequently with casual partners. This primarily took the form of alcohol-for-sex exchanges and occurred in alcohol serving establishments patronised by men who have sex with men, such as local *shebeens*, pubs and taverns in the townships. A common theme among men in this study was that purchasing alcohol for other men was a well-known and commonly used strategy for communicating attraction and initiating casual sex encounters. Men who were not 'out' about their same-sex practices were said to be the ones who usually initiated alcohol-for-sex exchanges because this provided them with a subtle—and safe—way to communicate their intentions:

If he's a closet case...like they will wink or they buy drinks for you...they approach us, we don't approach them... -

(Sandile, both masculine and feminine-identifying, 23 yrs, Atteridgeville).

Men were generally accepting of alcohol-for-sex exchanges and noted that it was widely understood in the townships that accepting drinks from men who were not one's friends meant that one was consenting to a *sexual* relationship with the buyer, whether or not the expectation was verbalised:

In the township, if someone buys for me a drink [*sic*] it means that you're going to sleep with him.-

(Siphelele, feminine-identifying, 25 yrs, Soshanguve).

[Some men say] 'Look if I buy you three *Savannas* [i.e. South African cider] would you go to my place with me.' Or, you'll probably buy [drinks for] them, not telling you that I'm actually expecting something in return, but then come late bells, then they'll say to you, 'Look, I bought you those drinks so we're going to my place.' -

(Banele, both masculine and feminine-identifying, 25 yrs, Mamelodi).

Many men admitted to having personally engaged in alcohol-for-sex exchanges as a way of securing partners for casual sex:

I didn't give money, the only thing I did is buy them [i.e. other men] drinks and then we just go over to my place and sleep [i.e., have sex] and the next morning [they] walk out... -

(Lesebo, masculine-identifying, 20 yrs, Hammanskraal).

It was not uncommon, however, for some men to attempt to evade the understood obligation to reciprocate sexually after consuming drinks purchased for them. Men explained that it was for this reason that they usually demanded sex first before they provided for the other man:

No, I don't buy [beer] for them, I just give them money. You can buy [beer] for them and then they run away. So we fuck first and then I give them money. -

(Tebogo, feminine-identifying, 34 yrs, Atteridgeville).

Other men, in turn, indicated that they did not purchase drinks for men they did not know precisely because these men could disappear without reciprocating sexually. A few alleged that some men pretended to be 'gay' so that they could enjoy 'free' drinks from others:

It is possible that you buy drinks for a straight guy who is not really attracted to other men but because he doesn't have money for drinks, so he will accept a drink and then later on he tells you to go to hell and then he goes his way. -

(Rendi, feminine-identifying, 24 yrs, Soshanguve).

Another common theme among men was that the failure to reciprocate sexually after accepting drinks from other men could lead to physical and sexual violence. Alcohol selling establishments in their townships were unsafe, particularly for openly gay and feminine-identifying men, many of whom were said to be at risk of being raped and physically assaulted by other men:

[He] beat me up because I drank his beers and I didn't want to leave with him, so he was angry... -

(Letsego, feminine-identifying, 34 yrs, Soshanguve).

If they [other men] buy you drinks, they want to demand sex without a condom. -

(Refiloe, feminine-identifying, 30 yrs, Mamelodi).

Perspectives on why transactional sex occurs in the townships

A common theme in the interviews was that transactional sex occurred due to the widespread perception in the townships that gays were much better off financially compared to most people in the townships.

Some [men] only sleep with gay people... So they will target gay men with money as most gay people in Atteridgeville have a lot of money. -

(Tefo, masculine-identifying, 20 yrs, Atteridgeville).

They [men and women] make assumptions about your life...you've got a car, you've got a house and you don't have a child so your wallet should always be full of money. -

(Lefu, both masculine and feminine-identifying, 31 yrs, Atteridgeville).

Lefu, above, described his township, Atteridgeville, as 'a beautiful township filled with gold diggers chasing after gay boys' and he noted that both men and women believed that gay men—a term that participants used to refer to men who were open about their same-sex sexuality—had fewer financial responsibilities since most had no children of their own to take care of.

The lifestyles of some men in the townships were also seen as contributing to the widespread perception that gay men were financially better off than most. Men made constant references to the material goods that they or their gay friends owned, such as houses, cars and fancy household furniture. These goods were associated with personal success and thus marked those who owned or had access to them as better off. The social venues, particularly the bars and clubs, that openly gay men patronised for entertainment purposes further added to the perception that they had more disposable income than most men in the townships. Other men disagreed with this widespread perception and insisted that 'gay men' only *appeared* to be better off than others in their communities because most were employed, hardworking and placed great importance on being economically self-sufficient. However, one-third of currently employed men in our sample did, in fact, report monthly incomes of between R8,000–R16,000 per month (i.e. USD1,000–\$2,000), which was substantially higher than South Africa's 2008 minimum wage of R1,500 (USD188) and the poverty datum line of R515 (USD64) (South Africa Minimum Wage Report 2008).

Another common view was that transactional sex occurred because gay men themselves were said deliberately to use material goods to attract and sustain relationships with desired partners. Several feminine-identifying men who had engaged in transactional sex as the providing partner observed that openly gay men were afraid of loneliness and thus used money and material goods as a form of 'insurance' against being abandoned by partners.

Yes, I give them [i.e. partners] money, clothes or anything [because] we are scared of loneliness. I am afraid that he is going to leave. -

(Mosegi, feminine-identifying, 22 yrs, Mamelodi).

We gays, it is how we want our relations[hips] to work. With money, you understand? I can get somebody who is not working but good looking... I can keep the person with money. That is how most gays, how we can grip a man. -

(Nathi, feminine-identifying, 38 yrs, Mamelodi).

A few men suggested that transactional sex dated back to 'a long time ago' when same-sex relationships were not as publicly acknowledged and gay men used money to attract desired sexual partners. This was said to have fueled the stereotype that 'gay men have money', which persists in many communities:

A long time ago people [i.e., other men] used to say 'I'll give you maybe R200 [if] you come and sleep with me. And that thing is still in their mind...-

(Sanele, masculine-identifying, 29 yrs, Atteridgeville).

Men shared personal experiences in which gay men gave them money even though they had not asked for such support.

There are gay people out there who like, they'd meet you today, it's Friday, you'd go and spend the night at their place, in the morning you wake up they take you shopping, like from underwear to shoes, you got the whole outfit for Saturday night. And then you become hooked to this... -

(Lefu, both masculine and feminine-identifying, 31 yrs, Atteridgeville).

One participant reported that he had woken up the morning following a casual sex encounter to find a wad of money ‘stashed’ under his pillow. Finally, men also hinted at a shortage of insertive anal sex partners and suggested that this was why some men readily provided material support to casual and regular partners, if they were willing to provide this.

Discussion

Our study is one of only a few published qualitative studies (but see also Niang et al. 2003; Okal et al. 2009) to examine transactional sex among black men who have sex with men in Africa. Over a third of the men in our study had engaged in transactional sex as providers or receivers of money and material goods. We were thus able to explore attitudes and experiences towards the practice from the perspectives of both providers and receivers. Qualitative studies of transactional sex typically interview only the receivers of material goods and rarely the providers. In our study, transactional sex was motivated by both material and non-material needs and money received from partners was used, among other things, to take care of daily living expenses (e.g., rent, food, transportation), purchase mobile phones and expensive clothes, and to purchase alcohol and drugs. Some providers, in turn, used money and material goods to demonstrate love, commitment and solidarity for intimate partners.

The exchange of sex for money and objects was widely viewed as a legitimate strategy for initiating and sustaining relationships with both regular and casual partners. Alcohol exchanges, in particular, were considered a perfectly acceptable way to communicate romantic, erotic and sexual desire for another man. Alcohol selling establishments were a popular venue for meeting potential sexual partners and alcohol exchanges provided men in the townships with a covert and safe platform to communicate attraction to other men. However, alcohol-based exchanges were associated with physical and sexual violence, particularly if one accepted alcoholic beverages from other men but failed to reciprocate sexually. Furthermore, alcohol-based exchanges usually preceded casual sex encounters.

An important finding from our study was that, in many cases, material resources flowed from the feminine-identifying partner to the masculine-identifying partner. In fact, the former were perceived to be wealthier than other men and were thus highly desired as romantic and erotic partners. This contradicts earlier studies of same-sex relationships in Africa which showed that these relationships often replicated wider gender norms in which resources flow from the masculine partner to the feminine partner and in which the providing partners usually control these relationships, while the receiving partners tend to be dependent and relatively powerless (Gaudio 1998; Moodie 1994). In this study, feminine-identifying providers did not necessarily have more control—sexual or otherwise—in these relationships. Instead, they seemed resigned to playing the provider role and were of the view that this was the only way that they could attract and sustain relationships with other men. Being a provider was thus not a privileged role and many were burdened by the responsibility. The apparently disadvantaged position of the feminine providers can be

attributed to the widespread perception among men in this study that insertive anal sex partners were in short supply and could only be secured with money and other material goods. This perceived shortage contributed to the ‘culture of materiality’ (Hunter 2002) reported by some men.

Our study also highlights something of the complexities of the concept of ‘transactional sex’. Numerous studies have pointed out that sexual relationships in many African countries—and indeed elsewhere around the world (see Zelizer 2005)—entail regular material exchanges and are characterised by the expectation that the masculine partner will provide for the feminine partner (Bhana and Morrell 2011; Hunter 2002; Jewkes et al. 2012). In our study, material and non-material exchanges played a key role in the ‘hooking up’ culture of the men we interviewed and there was general expectation that men involved in a relationship would support each other materially. Material and non-material exchanges were therefore part and parcel of the everyday obligations that men involved in romantic, erotic or sexual relationships had towards each other. Following Zelizer (2005), we thus acknowledge that it is much more illuminating to examine the obligations and networks that material exchanges create between partners than it is to focus simply on the fact that material exchanges occur in intimate relationships.

Another complexity is the issue of reciprocity which is rarely explored in detail in most studies. Often, there is a taken-for-granted presumption that the receivers of money and material goods reciprocate through sex. In our study, providers seemed to expect greater emotional commitment and longer lasting relationships from partners they provided for—and not just sex. However, this was not always forthcoming and some men’s expectations for material support bordered, instead, on the predatory. Many providers thus worried that their partners would leave them for other men with more material resources. Providers also voiced concern that some men only pretended that they were attracted to other men so that they would benefit materially from these relationships. While none of the receivers in our study indicated that this was the case for them, it was clear that some saw relationships with ‘gay men’ as key to accessing both basic subsistence goods and various consumer goods. This highlights the important role that poverty plays in these relationships as well as the fact that men who are perceived to have relatively more economic resources than those around them in the townships are highly desired as romantic and sexual partners.

Conclusion

Our study represents an initial foray into a rather complex and poorly understood phenomenon. We have shown that transactional sex was a widely accepted strategy used by men who have sex with other men to attract and sustain relationships with casual and regular partners. In addition to meeting subsistence and consumption needs, transactional sex was also a way for some MSM to express love and solidarity with intimate partners. Gender identity also emerged as an important construct for understanding men’s reasons for engaging in transactional sex, including their attitudes and experiences regarding the practice. However, further qualitative studies are needed to examine in greater detail some of the themes that our study has only just begun to identify, such as the relationship between transactional sex, gender identity and sexual identity. We especially recommend that future

studies focus on developing a better understanding of how providing or receiving money and material goods shifts the balance of power in these relationships. We also recommend future research that examines how the perception that there is a 'shortage' of insertive anal sex partners influences men's sexual practices and HIV-risk behavior. Finally, alcohol establishments in South Africa should be explored as potential platforms for reaching men with a variety of HIV-related education and services, particularly condoms and lubricants.

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Table 1

Characteristics of MSM cited in the paper

Pseudonym	Age	Gender identity	Employment status	Township
Banele	25	both feminine & masculine	unemployed	Mamelodi
Bheka	23	both masculine & feminine	employed	Soshanguve
Lesebo	20	masculine	unemployed	Hammanskraal
Lefu	31	both feminine & masculine	employed	Atteridgeville
Letsego	34	feminine	employed	Soshanguve
Mosegi	22	feminine	unemployed	Mamelodi
Mothudi	21	feminine	unemployed	Hammanskraal
Nathi	38	feminine	employed	Mamelodi
Poloko	26	masculine	employed	Soshanguve
Refiloe	30	feminine	unemployed	Mamelodi
Rendi	22	feminine	unemployed	Hammanskraal
Rudzani	29	masculine	unemployed	Hammanskraal
Sam	21	feminine	unemployed	Hammanskraal
Sandile	23	both feminine & masculine	unemployed	Atteridgeville
Sanele	29	masculine	unemployed	Atteridgeville
Siphelele	25	feminine	unemployed	Soshanguve
Tebogo	34	feminine	employed	Atteridgeville
Tefo	20	masculine	unemployed	Atteridgeville
Thuso	30	feminine	unemployed	Soshanguve
Tsebo	26	feminine	unemployed	Soshanguve
Tungu	20	feminine	unemployed	Hammanskraal

Engagement in transactional sex by self-reported gender identity among MSM in a qualitative sample from Tshwane, South Africa (N=77^{*})

Table 2

	Self-reported gender identity			Total
	Feminine	Masculine	Both masculine and feminine	
Ever engaged in transactional sex	17/40 (42.5%)	8/24 (33.3%)	4/13 (30.8%)	29/77 (38%)
Role assumed by MSM who had ever engaged in transactional sex				
Provider	12 (70.6%)	4 (50.0%)	2 (50.0%)	18/29 (62%)
Receiver	5 (29.4%)	4 (50.0%)	2 (50.0%)	11/29 (38%)

^{*} Data not available for four participants